



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

Opening Statement
Full Committee Hearing
Insular Affairs Legislative Hearing on Puerto Rico Political Status
Wednesday, June 16, 2021 - 1:00 PM

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Today the Committee is holding a second hearing to address Puerto Rico's political status, following the November 3rd referendum in which a clear majority of voters on the Island chose statehood. Also, two days ago the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a report on the constitutional and legal perspective of the bills before us.

H.R. 1522, the *Puerto Rico Statehood Admission Act*, which I introduced with Congressman Darren Soto, recognizes and respects that Puerto Rico has – through the ballot box – exercised its right to self-determination, rejected the current territorial status, and voted for statehood.

H.R. 1522 would constitute Congress's response to voters on the Island. It makes a formal offer of statehood to the American citizens of Puerto Rico, which would have to be ratified in a federally-sponsored referendum. As DOJ recognizes, H.R. 1522 does not impose or force statehood on the people of Puerto Rico. It empowers us, as we would have the final say on the matter through our vote, the only true and proven self-determination process. The bill follows the precedent established for Alaska and Hawaii, setting forth a binding, self-executing process to admit Puerto Rico as a State should a majority of voters favor it.

The other bill, H.R. 2070, blatantly ignores the will of Puerto Rico's voters and has serious constitutional flaws, according to DOJ.

During our last hearing it also became clear that this bill attempts to mislead voters in Puerto Rico by establishing a complicated, status convention process in which a few delegates could come up with fanciful or unconstitutional status options. It even goes as far as saying that Congress would be required to ratify whatever option comes out of this process, something Congress cannot constitutionally bind itself to do as the DOJ report has explicitly pointed out.

DOJ also stated that the only two non-territorial status options consistent with the U.S. Constitution are statehood and independence. We don't need a status convention to tell this to Congress or to the people of Puerto Rico. Any other option that this convention may come up with would be incompatible with the Constitution.

Mr. Chairman, a few days ago, on a separate matter DOJ announced that it would defend before the Supreme Court the constitutionality of the law that excludes Puerto Rico residents from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Some Members of Congress, including Members of this Committee, rightfully denounced this decision, calling for a legislative solution and a permanent fix to this unequal treatment.

It is true that Congress can pass legislation to give Puerto Rico access to SSI and other federal programs under which we are excluded. As the Island's sole representative in Congress, I've introduced multiple bills to achieve this and will continue to advance these efforts.

But it is similarly true that a future Congress could take away that access. And that's because as a territory, we will always be at Congress's mercy. Mr. Chairman, so-called "parity" is not equality, and it's not a permanent solution.

That's why we must respect Puerto Rico's vote and support H.R. 1522. Because only statehood will guarantee full and permanent equality for the 3.2 million Americans on the Island, and only statehood guarantees constitutional citizenship.

Now, as we discuss a path forward in this Committee, we must also make a choice: are we going to ignore the will of voters in Puerto Rico, and pretend that we know better than them? Or are we going to stand with our fellow citizens on the Island and respect their vote for full equality, for statehood?

Thank you. I yield back.